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RUMICEA/JICCENT MACDILL AFB FL  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000935

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LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV SOCI ECON ET ER

SUBJECT: GSE BLAMES U.S. FOR FOOD AND FUEL SHORTAGES

REF: ASMARA 918

Classified By: AMB Ron K. McMullen, for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

¶1. (C) The Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) through its sole political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), continues to conduct community meetings to explain to the Eritrean people the reasons for the shortages of basic food items, such as sugar and flour, as well as cooking gas and diesel (reftel). In addition to the community meetings, the GSE has required each Ministry to conduct sessions with its own civil service, primarily national service assignees. The ideas presented in these meetings are becoming increasingly odd, as the GSE maintains its course in blaming the United States Government for every difficulty in Eritrea. Given the extremely limited information available to the general populace, some Eritreans may fall prey to believing the GSE's propaganda.

¶2. (C) In one community meeting, PFDJ Head of Economic Affairs Hagos Ghebrehiwet claimed that the GSE "knows for sure" that the USG neither likes Eritrea nor wants it to be self-sufficient. He described U.S. food aid as "insect-infected grain that their (U.S.) pigs refused to eat," and stated that the United States did not want Eritrea to build a successful economy. If America wanted to help, he commented, it could have provided the GSE with tractors. Now, he went on, the USG is preventing Eritrea from buying food supplies, such as sugar and flour. He also alleged the Americans are trying to stop the GSE from using its own resources to buy weapons.

¶3. (C) When meeting with his employees, Minister of Education Semere Russom offered his theory for the increase in the numbers of indigent on the streets of Asmara, including children and the mentally ill. (Comment: While there is no hard data to show that poverty is increasing, Emboffs have observed a significant increase in the number of beggars, mentally ill, and street children in Asmara over the past 18 months. End Comment.) According to Russom, the U.S. Embassy in Asmara is providing each indigent with 4,000 nakfa (USD 266.67) a month, more than three times the monthly income of the average national service employee. Russom told his audience that the GSE has seen lines of individuals in front of the Embassy waiting to collect their monthly payments. In addition, Russom claimed that the U.S. Embassy is telling these individuals to stand in front of the Ministry of

Tourism office on Asmara's main street downtown, in order to create an image of poverty for tourists. Curiously, Russom also told his audience that the food shortages were a thing of the past, that the harvest of the upcoming year would be bountiful and that Eritrea would become a food exporter.

¶4. (C) Comment: The PFDJ's continuing public propaganda campaign appears to be reaching new, bizarre extremes. While post believes that most educated Eritreans will see through the GSE's unconvincing lies, given the lack of other sources of information and increasing frustration over shortages and restrictions, others may take the GSE's explanations as the truth. End Comment.

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